

# Woman doctor 'unusual for times'

Life in Camas at the turn of the century comes alive when Cecil Van Vleet, now 86, talks about his mother, Dr. Louisa "Lutie" Wright, who was the only doctor in town for many years, and who died tragically at age 51.

"She rode sidesaddle on a pony at first, but soon acquired a horse and buggy, having patients as far away as Yacolt and Mt. Norway," Van Vleet recalled. He went on to explain that his mother was born in Fern Prairie in 1862, in a house built by her father, Lewis Van Vleet, who had driven an ox team from Missouri to this far west territory in 1853, settling on a donation land claim in Fern Prairie and homesteading 160 acres next to it.

Still standing, directly across from the airport, is the huge barn that was built behind the house by Van Vleet, but the house burned to the ground in the 1940s. It was then owned by Oliver Langford. Present property owner is W.E. Schmitt. The Fern Prairie Cemetery was originally an acre of the Van Vleet homestead.

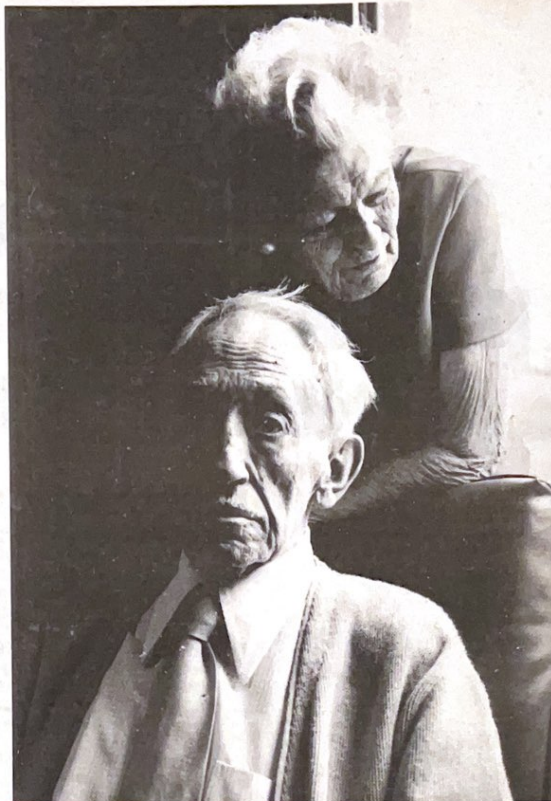
Young Lutie Van Vleet took an interest in nursing and early determined to be a doctor, unusual for a woman in those times. She taught in Grass Valley and other area schools, earning \$25 a month and "boarding around," which meant that

she took her meals with various families during the school year. She saved her money for medical school tuition, first attending the University of Oregon Medical College, then transferring to Ann Arbor, Mich., where she received her degree in 1885. She was just 23 years old.

Her first practice was in Missoula, Mont., but after one year she returned to LaCamas. Besides nursing sick ones through various diseases like typhoid fever, measles, scarlet fever and flu, the intrepid doctor delivered many babies in the area, including Glenn Farrell and Alice Blair.

Once, as Cecil tells it, a husband hurried in from the hills to get the doctor for his sick wife, but while he was in town a huge tree tipped over, blocking the road. When Dr. Wright and the husband met this obstacle, they rolled the horse under the obstruction, took the buggy apart, pushed it under, put it back together, and were on their way!

The doctor's first marriage to William Spicer, a druggist, didn't last, but produced, besides Cecil, another son Lewis Spicer, who was a member of the first Camas High School football team, and a daughter, Edith Spicer O'Rourke, now 80, who is a resident of San Francisco.



CECIL AND MARY VAN VLEET  
... remembrance of things past

Calif. Lewis, who lived in Port Angeles, died last year.

The busy doctor, struggling to raise three children and keep up with the medical bills of the community, married a widower with five children, Jim Wright, who owned a livery stable. Instead of improving her lot, she had taken on more responsibilities and life was not easy.

Cecil tells how he did not get along with his stepfather, feeling that the man was not good to his mother, or to his brother. So he eventually left, living with his grandparents, the Lewis Van Vleets, in Seattle, while he attended the university. It was at this time that he changed his name, legally, from Spicer to Van Vleet.

A graduate of the University of Washington with a master's degree in chemistry, Cecil also has good local memories, telling how he was in the same high school class with Nora Self, who later became a principal of Camas High School. In those days, it was a two-year school, so Cecil took his final two years at what is now Lincoln High School in Portland. Nora Self graduated in Vancouver.

It was shortly after he went to college that he was called home suddenly because of the death of his mother. It was 1913, and as Mr. Wright backed his horse into the shafts of their buggy, Dr. Wright came out of the house wearing a white apron, evidently frightening the horse, which

let go with a vicious kick that caught her under the chin and broke her neck.

It was tragic. The funeral was held at their home at Parker's Landing and many people came by boat, including Indians in canoes, remembering her many helpful deeds.

An intelligent, kindly woman, she served on the Camas School Board for 12 years, part of the time as chairman.

Cecil also recalls how as a youngster he had the agency for the Saturday Evening Post, selling the popular magazine for five cents a copy. He would go through the mill, contacting the workers, then hitch up the horse and buggy to sell in the country.

He remembers  
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DR. LOUISA WRIGHT  
... at age 23 (1885)

Grandfather Van Vleet telling how he had 24 cows on his dairy farm in Fern Prairie in the 1860s and would drive his ox team and wagon, loaded with butter, over Woodburn Hill to Parker's Landing, where it would be put on the steamer for Portland.

"He didn't drive down through LaCamas, because there was no LaCamas at that time," his grandson explained with a laugh.

Parker's Landing then was just west of the present marina at the port dock, the location of the Van Vleet home, which is over 100 years old. The property has been in the Van Vleet family ever since Lewis Van Vleet, a government surveyor as well as dairy farmer, who administered the estate of David C. Parker. Cecil's astute mother had urged his grandfather to retain the property, and it has been in the family ever since, though various renters have occupied it from time to time.

Born in 1890 in the same Fern Prairie home where his mother was born, Cecil Van Vleet has worked in many places, but has always called Camas home, returning periodically.

His employment for some 30 years was as a teacher. His first school was in southern Oregon, where, because some families left, he had but one pupil for about 20 days, a second-grader, part Indian, who rode to school on a donkey.

"I averaged one-fourth of a student for the quarter," he said, with a chuckle.

Other teaching assignments came in Oregon, Washington and California. In Portland he was a high school principal. For five years he taught chemistry at Vancouver High School, and started the first bank there. His instrument is the oboe. At a 50-year reunion in Vancouver recently, he met many former students, one who had taught chemistry for 20 years.

"I must have inspired him," he surmised. Van Vleet also liked math, in fact, he thinks he

probably spoiled a first-rate mathematician to become a third-rate chemist. His humor comes through often. While he taught in Vancouver his first wife, Elsie Moore Van Vleet, was teaching Latin and math in Washougal. Her death occurred after they had been married 30 years.

His last year of teaching was at a junior college in Stockton, Calif. Because he needed more money for his wife's illness, he went to work in the production end of the San Francisco Examiner, where he was paid twice his teaching salary.

"I was paid better to work with my hands than with my head," was his wry comment.

The Tacoma News Tribune and the Oregon Journal also used his services in the distribution departments. During World War I, he worked as a civilian at the Bremerton Navy Yards.

It was in Portland playing bridge that he met his present wife, a bridge life master, Mary Van Vleet, who described "Van" as a "very good player."

Bridge has meant much to them in the 23 years they have been married. They formed the Camas-Washougal Bridge Club, when they moved from Portland to the Parker's Landing home 20 years ago, remodeling the nine-room house to fewer, but larger, rooms and adding porches. The club met for years in their home and in their clubhouse, but they recently sold their interest in it, and it now meets at the Orchard Hills clubhouse.

At 86, Cecil Van Vleet has many memories of his home area and its pioneers. "I used to play cribbage with Kelly Loe, publisher of the Camas Post," he reminisced. "He was a good man ... older than I."

Camas and Washougal have grown considerably during his lifetime, and the port area also has grown, expanding only recently to include the Van Vleet property next to it.

But Cecil and Mary have legal right to live in their historical home as long as they desire.